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Replications and Refinements

Under this heading are brief reports of studies providing data that substantiate, disprove, or refine what we think we know. These Notes consist of a summary of the study's procedure and as many details about the results as space allows. Additional details concerning the results can be obtained by communicating directly with the author.

Positive–Negative Asymmetry in the Evaluation of Trivial Stimuli

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WHEN PEOPLE MAKE a series of dichotomous evaluative judgments (such as in the allocation of bipolar trait adjectives to target individuals), they tend to do so asymmetrically, with a greater proportion of positive responses than would be predicted by chance alone. This positive–negative asymmetry effect has been shown to be a robust phenomenon, and some people argue that this asymmetry is a manifestation of normal adaptive functioning (see Peeters & Czapinski, 1990, for an overview). Research by, among others, Adams-Webber (1978), Benjafield (1984), and Tuohy and Stradling (1987) showed that the proportion of positive responses tended to be approximately 60%. That ratio is assumed to approximate an optimal figure-ground relationship between negatives and positives, because it makes the negatives maximally salient against a background of positives. The ratio might have an evolutionary significance. Without a ratio that favors positivity over negativity, an organism might be unmotivated to approach novel objects, stimuli, or contexts. With such a ratio, an organism that faces neutral or unfamiliar stimuli would be weakly motivated to approach and to engage in exploratory behavior. Such a tendency might have important survival value (Cacioppo & Berntson,

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1994). If this is the case, then this positive–negative ratio should be robust and be present in the evaluation of trivial stimuli—for example, inanimate objects—without criteria for preference. In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that when people make evaluative judgments about trivial stimuli (beans), they tend to do so asymmetrically, and the ratio of positive judgments is around 60%.

Participants (40 Dutch college students; 16 men and 24 women) were seated in separate cubicles and given a plastic bag that contained little transparent bags, each bag holding two beans. The task of the participants was to evaluate each pair of beans as either positive or negative. The participants were asked to use their own evaluative criteria for positive and negative. If a pair of beans was evaluated positively, then we asked the participants to put them in the plus box (a sealed nontransparent box with a large "+" on it). If a pair of beans was evaluated negatively, then we asked the participants to put them in the minus box (a sealed nontransparent box with a large "–" on it). Whether the plus box or minus box was placed on the left or right for the participants was randomly determined. The participants were given 5 min to evaluate as many pairs of beans as they could. For each participant, we calculated the ratio of positive to negative evaluations. Analyses did not reveal any gender differences in evaluations. Consequently, gender was not included as a variable in subsequent analyses. Results showed a positive–negative asymmetry in the evaluation of the pairs of beans. The mean ratio was 60% positive evaluations to 40% negative evaluations. That ratio was significantly different from a 50%–50% ratio, $t(39) = 4.39$, $p < .0001$. The results of the present study replicated those of earlier studies by showing that when people made a series of dichotomous evaluative judgments, they did so asymmetrically, with a greater proportion of positive responses than of negative responses. Furthermore, the present study shows that the ratio of positive to negative responses was about 60%–40% and that that ratio was observed even for trivial stimuli without criteria for preference.

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